



Voices For Egalitarian Society

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Abstract

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker was a visionary social reformer far ahead of his era in Tamil Nadu. His life's mission was to ensure that both men and women lived with dignity and enjoyed equal opportunities to develop their capabilities. To achieve this, he rejected every form of social discrimination and promoted rationalism, equality, and social justice. His reformist ideals continue to echo as powerful voices for an egalitarian and casteless society that guarantees equality for all, including women.

Keywords: upliftment, social reform, discrimination, Brahmanism, untouchability, egalitarianism

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The 139th birth anniversary of E. V. Ramasamy, popularly known as **Periyar**, was celebrated across Tamil Nadu on 17 September 2018 with immense enthusiasm. Despite the celebrations, a few incidents of vandalism targeting his statues occurred in Chennai and Dharapuram in Tiruppur District (The Week, 2018). Born in 1879 and active until his death in 1973, Periyar is remembered as a tireless crusader against caste hierarchy, superstition, and meaningless rituals. He was a strong advocate of rational thinking, women's liberation, and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

Both major Dravidian political parties in Tamil Nadu—the **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)** and the **Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)**—trace their ideological origins to him, and even today, no political leader in the state openly criticizes him. Periyar founded the **Self-Respect Movement** and played a vital role in shaping the **Justice Party**, which later evolved into the **Dravida Kazhagam (DK)**. The DMK later branched off from this movement (Frontline, 2018).

Periyar remains one of the most significant figures in Tamil Nadu's political and social history. His influence shaped not only the Dravidian movement but also the larger political and cultural landscape of the state. He is celebrated as a humanist who empathized deeply with the oppressed, particularly the non-Brahmin communities. His approach to social change was radical yet practical, focusing on rationalism and equality.

To understand Periyar's ideas, one must also view them in the context of **colonial South India**. The conquest of the region by the **British East India Company** occurred in two distinct stages between 1744 and 1763, which marked the end of French influence (Rajaraman, 1988). Between 1792 and 1801, Tamil territories came under British control, and from the early nineteenth century, Tamil Nadu became part of the **Madras Presidency**, with Fort St. George in Madras as the administrative

center (Baliga, 1960). Initially, the Presidency developed from a few coastal trading settlements but expanded into a major administrative unit. After India's independence, the **Madras State** was formed in 1956, and on **14 January 1969**, it was officially renamed **Tamil Nadu** through an Act of Parliament (Rajaraman, 1988).

Social Reforms

The social structure of nineteenth-century Tamil Nadu was deeply influenced by religion and rigid social hierarchies. The Hindu social system at the time was stratified, and most customs carried religious justification. Discrimination based on **birth, caste, and gender** was widespread. The most vital element of India's reform movements was the continuous struggle against such inequalities and the social exclusion of women and the untouchables. These reform efforts acted as powerful catalysts for modernization and social transformation (Trilok Nath, 1987).

The progress achieved through these movements was partly due to the **Western impact** and the exposure to modern education under British rule. Unlike earlier foreign powers, the British introduced a distinct type of influence that encouraged social and intellectual reform. Western education fostered rationalism, scientific inquiry, and a humanistic outlook, which inspired reformers to challenge traditional prejudices and religious orthodoxy (Baliga, 1960).

Prominent Indian reformers such as **Raja Ram Mohan Roy** and **Keshab Chandra Sen** led early efforts to eliminate regressive practices like **child marriage**, **caste discrimination**, and the **denial of education to women**. Their contributions paved the way for later reforms, including the initiatives of **Ramalingaswamy's Samarasa Suddha Sanmargha Sangham**, the **Brahmo Samaj**, the **Theosophical Society**, and the **Ramakrishna Mission**. These movements laid the groundwork for more inclusive social attitudes and greater freedom for marginalized communities (Frschick, 1969).

By the late nineteenth century, reformist organizations such as the **Madras Hindu Social Reform Association (1892)** and the **Adi-Dravida Mahajana Sabha (1892)** emerged to combat issues like child marriage and the denial of widow remarriage. Periodicals such as *Swadesamitran* and *Crescent* spread progressive ideas. The founding of **Veerasingam's Widows' Home in 1898** symbolized the growing public awareness of women's rights (Frschick, 1969). These social reforms eroded caste boundaries, weakened the dominance of religion over everyday life, and enabled access to education for lower castes and women.

However, the growing divide between **Brahmins and non-Brahmins** also defined the social and political climate of the Madras Presidency. Leaders such as **Annie Besant**, who emphasized India's Brahminical past during her Home Rule movement in 1914, unintentionally deepened this divide (Frschick, 1969). These tensions laid the groundwork for social justice movements like those led by Periyar, which sought to ensure communal representation and equality in education and employment.

Periyar E. V. Ramasamy – A Socio-Political Leader

Periyar Erode Venkata Ramasamy (1879–1973) was one of the most influential social reformers and human rights advocates in South India. He strongly opposed inequality, superstition, and caste-based oppression. Throughout his lifetime, he worked relentlessly to promote human dignity and equal rights. Revered as *Thanthai Periyar* ("Father Periyar"), he was regarded as a guiding force for Tamil society for more than five decades (Varghese Jeyaraj, 2017).

Periyar's vision centered on building an **egalitarian and casteless society**. He believed that every person, regardless of gender, caste, or social status, deserved equal access to education and employment. The honorific title "Periyar," meaning "The Great One," was conferred upon him by a group of women in 1938, recognizing his tireless efforts to advance women's welfare and rights (Varghese Jeyaraj, 2017).

He consistently advocated **women's emancipation** as an essential condition for achieving equality. To Periyar, liberation was not merely political freedom but social justice achieved through rational education, scientific thinking, and human dignity. He firmly believed that rational and liberal education could free women from social bondage and enable them to participate equally with men in all spheres of life (Kudi Arasu, 1931).

Periyar also stressed that **political freedom** alone was meaningless unless social and communal equality were achieved. He argued that without abolishing the caste system and ensuring the inclusion of marginalized communities, India could not become a truly independent nation (Kudi Arasu, 1929). He viewed **human rights** as encompassing women's rights, the rights of children, workers, and the oppressed. To correct centuries of social imbalance, he proposed **communal reservation** in education and employment, based on population proportion, to ensure fair representation for all communities (Varghese Jeyaraj, 2017).

His reformist work was comprehensive, combining social revolution, rationalism, and a fearless critique of religious orthodoxy. Through the **Self-Respect Movement**, he promoted equality and dignity, particularly for non-Brahmin communities. His reform agenda was grounded in logic, science, and reason rather than blind faith. In just two decades, Periyar's activism accelerated social change that might otherwise have taken centuries (Frschick, 1969).

Social Reform Voice

Periyar's passion for social reform began in his youth in **Erode**, where he witnessed discrimination and religious dogmatism firsthand. Determined to bring change, he entered politics by joining the **Indian National Congress** during **Gandhiji's Non-Cooperation Movement** in 1920. As a congressman, Periyar supported Gandhi's programs promoting prohibition, Hindu–Muslim unity, and the upliftment of marginalized communities (Sen, 1974).

He gained national recognition in 1924 when he participated in the **Vaikom Satyagraha**, a protest in Travancore State demanding the right of untouchables to use public roads near temples. His role earned him the title "**Vaikom Veerar**" (Hero of Vaikom). The movement elevated him as a defender of the oppressed and expanded his influence across South India (Varghese Jeyaraj, 2017).

Periyar also protested against caste segregation within institutions funded by the national movement, such as the **Seranmadevi Gurukulam** in Tirunelveli, which discriminated against non-Brahmin students (Varghese Jeyaraj, 2017). His disillusionment with the Congress Party grew when it failed to address such inequalities. In 1925, he proposed a resolution demanding **communal representation** proportional to population at the Tamil Nadu Congress Conference in Kanchipuram, but when it was rejected, he resigned from the party (Frschick, 1969).

Following his departure, Periyar established the **Self-Respect Movement** and launched the Tamil weekly **Kudi Arasu** ("People's Government") in 1925, where he published powerful critiques of superstition, caste discrimination, and patriarchy. In 1928, he also founded an English weekly titled **Revolt**, aimed at spreading rationalist and progressive ideas (The Hindu, 1928). Through these

publications, he communicated directly with the masses in simple Tamil, inspiring people to question entrenched social hierarchies and demand equality.

Several provincial **Self-Respect Conferences** were organized to spread his reform agenda: the first at Chengalpattu (1929), the second at Erode (1930), and the third at Virudhunagar. These gatherings united people from different castes and communities under the shared vision of self-respect, social equality, and human dignity. The movement offered a new sense of hope to the oppressed who had long been denied identity and respect (Frschick, 1969).

Periyar's work also significantly advanced **women's liberation**. Building on the ideas of reformers like **Jyotirao Phule**, he argued that **arranged marriages** enslaved women and promoted the concept of **love marriage** based on mutual consent. He insisted that women's education and employment were vital for achieving gender equality. Remarkably, long before family planning became part of national policy, Periyar advocated for population control as a means of ensuring women's health and freedom, even suggesting medical solutions to prevent unwanted pregnancies (Viduthalai, 2019).

He courageously spoke against **Brahminical dominance**, superstition, and religious exploitation. Despite facing criticism, Periyar's fearless advocacy inspired generations of thinkers and activists. His speeches and writings, delivered in accessible Tamil, made his rationalist philosophy understandable to all. The **Dravidian Movement**, shaped by his ideas, promoted a secular, social-justice-oriented vision that continues to influence Tamil Nadu's politics and culture today. His courage came from his unwavering belief in human equality and **self-respect**, earning him admiration not just in India but around the world.

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